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ABSTRACT

Standards-based reform activity dominated K-12 education during the 1990s, reflecting a consensus that improving learning requires state-level curricular standards and examinations. Opponents argue state-imposed standards and tests overly burden districts, degrade teaching and learning, suffer from numerous technical problems, and have failed to improve achievement. These concerns have been raised by opponents, particularly parents, of Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and Student Assessment System (WSAS), and lobby groups succeeded derailing early plans for a high school graduation test. Despite opposition, efforts to implement standards-based initiatives are impressive, and interview data from 50 Wisconsin school districts indicate curriculum directors view them favorably. While acknowledging technical problems and teacher resistance, these directors report the initiative compels teachers to engage in curriculum analysis and revision and to focus attention of improving teaching and learning. The standards-based movement has shown potential for improving teaching and learning, but unnerves many, causing about half of curriculum directors to doubt the initiative can be sustained. Sustaining the effort requires addressing current shortcomings and may necessitate changes in K-12 governing structures. The governor should authorize the Council on Model Academic Standards to coordinate and oversee efforts to improve the initiative, including commissioning a comprehensive review of standards, describing and disseminating model state curricula reflecting these standards drawn from best practices, and developing and implementing a statewide system of "value-added" assessment. To provide a governance structure in which policy initiatives can survive on their merits, Wisconsin should abolish the Department of Public Instruction and establish a semi-autonomous Board of State Governors for K-12 education. (Contains 25 references.) (TEJ)

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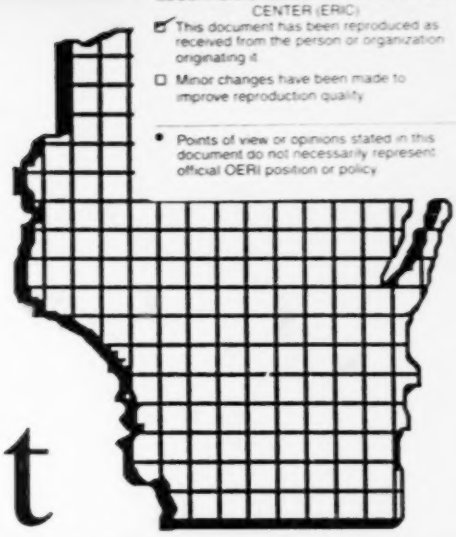

March 2000 Volume 13, Number 1

Standards-Based Education Reform in Wisconsin: *What It Will Take to Make It Work*

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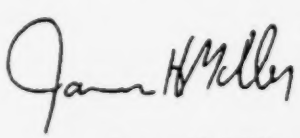
REPORT FROM THE PRESIDENT:

Recently, the liberal American Federation of Teachers union evaluated Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and gave our standards a letter grade of *C*. The conservative Fordham Foundation also evaluated Wisconsin's standards programs and issued a letter grade of *C-*. When liberal and conservative institutions agree that our so-called standards reforms are mediocre, it is time to take a serious look at what is happening to substance in our schools.

We contracted with Professor Mark Schug and retired Professor Richard Western from the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to evaluate standards-based programs in Wisconsin. In their study they review the trends nationally in the standards movement and then evaluate what is happening in Wisconsin. In their research they also randomly selected fifty curriculum directors from school districts across the state, and interviewed them on how they view the issue of standards reform.

Their research paints a picture of an idea whose time has *not* come in Wisconsin. Early in the report they pinpoint the real problem that inhibits meaningful reforms. Students in other states who have been tested for their knowledge have not fared well compared to other tests. This has led bureaucrats and parents to charge that the test may be off. At no point has it occurred to people that perhaps the real answer is the reverse. Much of our curricula has been "dumbed down" to the point where students do well on ordinary standardized tests, but don't know much. Schug and Western point out that one of the problems in Wisconsin has been the ability of special interest groups to continually water down the possibility of really improving the substance of our curricula in various subjects.

What will certainly be the most controversial part of this report, however, is their recommendation to constitutionally abolish the office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Their arguments are that the approximately four billion dollars spent by the State of Wisconsin would be best served by an educational institution buffered against direct political pressures and electoral politics. This idea has been raised in the past and should certainly be debated in the future. Educational bureaucrats in Madison are not likely to ever embrace reforms that alienate their political constituencies. Real reform will only occur when education is viewed as what is best for students and the public, not for special interests.



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STANDARDS-BASED EDUCATION REFORM IN WISCONSIN:

What It Will Take to Make It Work

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Executive Summary

In Wisconsin and throughout the United States, standards-based reform activity dominated K-12 education in the latter half of the 1990s. The movement reflected a consensus view that improving learning among K-12 pupils would require adoption of state-level curricular standards and state-level examinations linked to those standards.

But many educators and other citizens have opposed the standards-based movement from the outset, arguing that standards and tests imposed by state law burden local school districts and degrade teaching and learning. Opposition has been heightened by recent evidence about technical problems related to standards-based testing programs and by results from several states showing that many students are learning little in school. These problems have caused legislators around the country to soften standards-based programs in various ways. At the same time, critics viewing the standards and standards-based examinations from a different perspective fault many of them for being vague and trivial. As the standards-based examinations come into more frequent use in decisions about grade-level promotion and graduation, the concerns will intensify.

Wisconsin's standards-based reform initiative has been marked by some of the conflicts and uncertainties that now overshadow the movement nationally. It encountered resistance at the outset, and many of the early critics remain deeply skeptical today, asserting various criticisms of Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) examinations. Some resistance also has been forthcoming from students and parents, particularly in regard to "high stakes" uses of WSAS testing, and parental lobby groups have succeeded in derailing early plans for a high stakes high school graduation test. Legislative retrenchment of this sort may undercut the incentives (for teachers to focus on standards-based content, for students to work hard to learn) the initiative was intended to create.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Wisconsin teachers and school administrators have made an impressive beginning in their early efforts to implement the standards-based initiative. Interview data we collected from a survey of 50 Wisconsin school districts suggest that most curriculum directors view the standards-based initiative favorably. While acknowledging that certain technical problems and problems of teacher resistance do continue to complicate the implementation task, most curriculum directors report that the initiative has prompted teachers to engage in worthwhile tasks of curriculum analysis and revision, focusing attention sharply on substantive efforts to improve teaching and learning.

The standards-based movement seems therefore to have reached a crossroads. It has shown strong potential for improving student learning by providing new focus and direction for the work educators do, but it also has unnerved many educators, parents, and other citizens. In light of this tension, about half of the curriculum directors we interviewed doubted whether the initiative could be sustained.

About that question, much will depend on whether those responsible for it can retain the features that give it a distinctive edge while at the same time working to improve the program and develop support for it. The effort will require, at the very least, midstream attention to the shortcomings and implementation problems that have already begun to surface. It may also require attention of a more general sort to the K-12 governance structure within which standards-based education reform ultimately will stand or fall in Wisconsin. With these points of reference in mind, we offer the following recommendations.

1. **The Governor should authorize the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards to coordinate and oversee ongoing efforts to develop and improve the standards-based initiative. These efforts should include, but need not be limited to,**
   - **(a) commissioning a comprehensive review of the standards and the WSAS examinations in order to determine, in light of questions and criticisms raised to date, whether revisions are warranted;**
   - **(b) describing and disseminating model state curricula reflecting the standards, synthesized from best practices reported by successful school districts, in order to strengthen the program of implementation assistance now provided by the DPI; and**
   - **(c) developing and implementing a statewide system of "value-added" assessment to be incorporated in the WSAS so that schools and school districts may assess their effectiveness by reference to their own starting points.**

2. **To provide a governance structure within which education policy initiatives have an improved chance of surviving on their merits, Wisconsin should,**

   (a) **take constitutional steps to abolish the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction; and**

   (b) **establish a semi-autonomous Board of State Governors for K-12 education.**

Introduction

In Wisconsin and throughout the United States, standards-based reform activity dominated K-12 education in the latter half of the 1990s. The movement reflected a consensus view that obtaining substantial improvement in learning among K-12 students would require adoption of state-level curricular standards and state-level examinations linked to those standards. Throughout the decade, of course, educators worked on other initiatives as well, including multicultural instructional programs, school-to-work programs, and programs aimed at decreasing the number of students individual teachers would be responsible for teaching. But the standards-based idea took hold with singular firmness (thanks in large part to incentives created by federal law) in state-level executive and legislative offices, state departments of education, and school districts. As of January 2000, every state except Iowa had adopted standards in at least some subject areas, and 44 states had adopted standards in English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Forty-eight states now administer statewide testing programs, and 41 of the 48 link the tests to the curricular standards they have adopted (Jerald, 2000, p. 64). In leadership circles generally, support for standards-based reform remains strong, as evidenced by endorsements that continue to issue from governors, CEOs, influential educators, and Democratic and Republican presidential candidates.

But the consensus view never was a unanimous view. Many educators opposed the standards-based movement from the start, contending that standards and tests imposed by state law would burden local school districts and degrade teaching and learning. Now, as school districts around the country have begun to make progress in implementing the standards-based idea, opposition to it has intensified and become more widespread. Much of the opposition stems from fear that standards-based examinations will show many students to be learning little in school (Steinberg, 1999). Early rounds of testing in Arizona, Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia suggest that this fear is well founded. One might suppose in these cases that critics would fault the instructional programs producing the unsatisfactory results (see Hartocollis, 1999). Especially among parents and educators accustomed to seeing local students do well according to other measures, however, the tendency has been to blame the new standards-based examinations. There must be something wrong, the argument runs, with standards and examinations that describe most students in the respective testing populations as failures (see, e.g., Steinberg, 1999, December 3). A variation of the argument holds that the standards and tests will have a disparate impact on minority students and will therefore be vulnerable to a constitutional challenge based on the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. (One such challenge has reached the Texas Supreme Court, where it failed.)

Other bad news also has put the new standards-based programs in a bad light. A round of data-processing errors in 1999 distorted students' scores on standards-based examinations in six states, resulting in erroneous placement of many students (more than 8,000 in New York City) in remedial summer classes (Viadero & Blair, 1999). Some teachers and principals have been found tampering with test scores or providing improper help to students during testing sessions, in order to bolster schools' performance profiles (Goodnough, 1999). And critics coming at standards-based reform from a different angle have faulted the standards adopted in some states as vague and trivial (Finn, Petrilli, & Vanourek, 1998). Time and resources are now being wasted, according to this view, on implementation of standards too weak to make a difference.

All of these arguments will gain force, and prompt new rounds of litigation, as standards-based test scores come into use in decisions about grade-level promotion and high school graduation. The standards-based movement seems therefore to have reached a crossroads (see Hoff, 1999). It has emerged as a strong force in the schools, potentially capable of providing new focus and direction for the work educators do. At the same time, it has generated a backlash among some parents and other critics who see it as a flawed, blunt instrument that places undue power in the hands of people too remote from local circumstances to have any legitimate say about day-to-day practice in local classrooms.

No allegations of test tampering or egregious technical blunders have arisen to date in connection with Wisconsin's standards-based reform activity, and Wisconsin's standards-based examinations are not slated for use in anything close to "high stakes" decisions (i.e., decisions about grade-level promotion or high school graduation) until the 2002-2003 school year. Even so, Wisconsin's initiative has been marked by uncertainties and conflicts of the sort that now overshadow the standards movement nationally.

The initiative got off to a shaky start when early drafts of the standards were put forward and found wanting, and the teams named to write them were replaced by Governor Thompson's Council on Model Academic Standards. The tension implicit in that turn of events has not altogether disappeared. Many educators who favored loose stan-

dards (or none at all) at the outset remain deeply skeptical now, and many bristle with particular criticisms of the Model Standards and the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) examinations that have since been adopted. Student resistance is a potential problem, too. High school students in some districts have balked at taking the grade 10 WSAS examination, or have refused to take it seriously. Some parents have lobbied hard against high-stakes uses of WSAS scores, and the Wisconsin legislature in turn has acted to postpone and soften some WSAS accountability measures. Looking on as parties bearing operational responsibility for the results, some educators fear that these legislative accommodations will undercut the incentives that the WSAS system was intended to create, leaving teachers and administrators holding the bag. Nor is there any reason to believe that weakened incentives within the K-12 system will be counter-balanced by other incentives related to employment opportunities or college admissions. Wisconsin employers generally have shown little interest in requesting high school transcripts for consideration in hiring decisions, and the UW System has to date found no way to use WSAS scores in admissions decisions (for discussion, see UW System, 1999, October).

In this context, standards-based reform could founder, scuttled by ongoing, unfriendly follow-up legislation or dragged down by grudging, minimal compliance in the schools. Much will depend on whether those responsible for sustaining the initiative can hold fast to the principles that give it a real edge while at the same time working to gain support for it among the lay and professional public. The effort will require, at the very least, midstream attention to certain shortcomings and implementation problems that have already begun to surface. It may also require attention of a more general sort to the K-12 governance structure within which standards-based education reform ultimately will stand or fall in Wisconsin.

We address these points in the report that follows, beginning with a brief account of why the standards-based reform idea strikes its supporters and detractors as something genuinely new in the long, desultory history of reform proposals in K-12 education.

The Standards-Based Idea

The standards-based approach to education reform differs from other approaches in that it focuses directly on two elements of schooling that determine in large measure what is demanded in schools and therefore what students can be expected to learn. The first of these is curriculum — what is taught. The second is assessment — how we judge what is taught and learned (Resnick & Resnick, 1985, p. 5).

One might suppose that any attempt at improving education would address these two elements, but in fact they are often ignored or regarded as matters of secondary importance, even in large-scale reform initiatives. Those who propose to improve education by reducing average class-size, for example, believe that good effects will follow if teachers are enabled to work with fewer students, and some evidence from recent class-size initiatives, including Wisconsin's, suggests that this is so. But the immediate aim of the class-size initiatives is simply to get class sizes down so that good effects of an unspecified nature may be pursued by teachers through closer attention to individual students in a classroom climate made more orderly and agreeable by the decrease in numbers. The good effects in question might include a qualitative change in what is taught, but that outcome, if it were to occur, would be a by-product discovered as a result of the project, not its goal or driving force. School-to-work initiatives provide a second example. In these initiatives the assumption is that good effects will occur if school programs are reoriented toward career planning and the development of knowledge and skills related to labor market demands. But these initiatives have been implemented throughout the country without careful attention to what they imply for curriculum or assessment. The "applied academics" concept featured in school-to-work programs has never been spelled out concretely and comprehensively, for example, and school-to-work programs (including Wisconsin's) have generally been designed so that nothing can be learned from them about their impact on student learning.

The ongoing tendency to ignore curriculum and assessment reflects a tacit view among educators, largely unexamined until recently, that these matters have already been thought through and settled. The curricular consensus, such as it is, hearkens back to developments in the 19th century, when schools in the United States differentiated their curricula into vocational, general, and college preparatory tracks. It was a move made in response to changes in the school population and changes in the economy, and it was ushered in by an educational rationale emphasizing the importance of efficiency, flexibility, and the importance of meeting students' needs and interests (Angus & Mirel, 1999; Krug, 1964).

The dual effect, intended only in part, was to de-emphasize academic learning and to valorize utopian curricular goals permitting, in practice, wide disparities — from district to district, from school to school, even from eighth-grade classroom to eighth-grade classroom within a school — in what students would study and learn (see, e.g., Boyer, 1983, pp. 71-84). The academic vacuum in which such differentiation flourished left many classroom teachers, especially those serving the vast "unspecial" majority, with no firm institutional authority for any academic ethos they might wish to establish (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985, esp. pp. 184-192). They could insist only on what they could negotiate with their students, in day-to-day classroom interaction (Cusick, 1983). As many critics have observed, the ensuing disparities reinforced the social class distinctions that generally corresponded to enrollment patterns in the differentiated tracks.

Inattention to assessment of learning in reform proposals also reflects a legacy of tacit assumptions. One is that teachers already assess students' learning in the daily course of classroom practice, using an array of quizzes, graded homework assignments, weekly tests, papers, and special projects. The other is that, for larger purposes, the profession has already developed an ample supply of standardized assessment instruments — too many, some would say — and that the necessary assessment programs are therefore firmly in place. According to these assumptions, the remaining issues have to do with over-reliance on certain sorts of tests, harmful effects of testing practices for students who tend to test poorly, and so on.

But if we look at assessment as a means of fostering improvement in teaching and learning, a different issue arises. When the task of assessing learning falls to individual teachers who plan their instruction in an academic vacuum, the dynamics that drive curricular differentiation once again come into play. Absent any independent specification of what is to be taught and learned, a teacher might decide, for example, to assess students routinely by means of daily worksheets and weekly tests focused in a low-inference manner on whatever textbook readings he or she has seen fit to assign (see, e.g., Goodlad, 1984). Far from being put off by such a regimen, moreover, students may assent to it readily — in fact they may push for it quite deliberately — in the ongoing, informal negotiations by means of which they and their teachers come to terms about the academic norms that will govern their work. In such a regimen, after all, students and teachers can find something to like. The low-level routine reduces risk and uncertainty for students, and those who are at least minimally compliant will ordinarily be able to avoid failure in the climate of expectations it helps to establish. At the same time, the routine provides teachers with management tools — a gradebook, for example, chock full of grades for each student, ready for display to any parents or administrators who might inquire about a report card grade — plus a scheme for imposing structure on classroom time.

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At the institutional level, the assessment instruments that have until recently been taken for granted within K-12 education — the familiar standardized achievement and college admission tests — also serve poorly if the goal is to provide focus and direction for study in the K-12 schools. These instruments do not make clear to students and teachers what sort of learning is to be expected in a given course of study (Resnick & Resnick, 1985, p. 11), nor do they examine students on content taught in particular courses. They are not designed to do that. They are designed, in fact, to be divorced from school curricula, so that students cannot study for them and teachers cannot teach to them. In providing aggregate reports of achievement by classes or schools, they serve a purpose of institutional monitoring; but they do not serve instructional purposes.

The alternative would be to turn toward an assessment system featuring periodic, externally administered examinations for which schools deliberately prepare their students through courses of study informed by the curricular standards that also inform the examinations. School systems in France, the Netherlands, and England use assessment systems of this sort, and in those countries the systems do influence teaching practice and provide a powerful incentive for learning (Bishop, 1996, pp. 111-145).

We have not been without examples of such assessment in the United States, but our examples, until recently, have been associated only with our most able and our least able students, not our student population generally. One of these is the Advanced Placement Program, which functions in a manner similar to the assessment systems operating in some European countries. It specifies, for the various subject areas, well-publicized courses of study as well as examinations (also well publicized) tailored to those courses of study. The examinations are externally admin-

istered, so that they cannot be put to tactical uses in classroom negotiation. Teachers teach to these examinations and students study for them, yet the examinations appear to most observers to be thoughtful and challenging — anything but the trivial pursuit exercises deplored by people who object reflexively to the very idea of assessing learning by tests — so that "teaching to the test" implies thoughtful, challenging instruction about worthwhile content. Minimum competency tests, designed ordinarily for use with low-achieving student populations, provide a second example. They also have influenced the content of the teaching that goes along with minimum-competency programs. Due process requirements, in fact, forbid districts from using minimum competency tests unless they can show that the students in question have had an opportunity to learn the content on which they are tested. By focusing only on minimal levels of performance, however — by providing a sort of standards floor — the minimum competency programs do not provide a model for comprehensive efforts to upgrade standards.

The standards-based reform idea looks genuinely new because it features a conception of curriculum and assessment that differs markedly from the conceptions presupposed in the traditions noted above. Instead of school programs differentiated according to theories about social efficiency and implemented by teachers acting as individual agents, constrained only by their own preferences and their (negotiated) understanding of their pupils' needs and interests, it calls for an explicit determination of what should be taught and learned, expressed as a set of curricular standards. Instead of institutional assessment programs detached from courses of study, it calls for curricular examinations aligned with the standards that shape courses of study, so that teachers can prepare students for the examinations and students can study for them.

Developing a comprehensive standards-based system of this sort obviously would require a large-scale effort, one that many school districts would lack the capacity to undertake. But there is, in the United States, no national ministry of education to undertake it, nor is it clear that the U.S. Constitution authorizes the federal government to undertake it directly through the U.S. Department of Education. Early on, therefore, proponents of standards-based reform have felt uncertain about how such a movement might be launched, financed, and governed. They took what has turned out to be a decisive step, however, in September 1989. In Charlottesville, Virginia, President Bush and several of the nation's governors (led by Arkansas' governor, Bill Clinton) met and committed themselves to revitalizing American public education by establishing "clear national performance goals" related to "challenging subject matter in core academic subjects" (Angus & Mirel, 1999, p. 1). The idea drew widespread bipartisan support, including strong support from the late Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers.

In March 1994, President Clinton moved the initiative forward, signing Public Law 103-227, called the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. It provided for $400 million annually in grants for states and school districts that committed themselves to establishing "high standards for curriculum content and student performance." In September 1994, the President signed Public Law 103-761, called Improving America's Schools Act. In a section titled Challenging Standards, this Act provided that state education plans submitted pursuant to the new federal policy "shall demonstrate that the state has developed or adopted challenging content standards and challenging student performance standards that will be used by the state, its local education agencies, and its schools to carry out this part [of the Act's requirements], except that a state shall not be required to submit such standards [to the U.S. Secretary of Education]."

Wisconsin soon responded. Late in 1994, DPI Superintendent John Benson appointed teams to begin work on state curricular standards. Governor Thompson then appointed his Council on Model Academic Standards. And the legislature enacted Wisconsin Act 27, Section 2807.118.30(1g)(a), which states that "by August 1, 1998, school boards shall adopt pupil academic standards in mathematics, science, reading and writing, geography, and history." The standards-based reform movement was launched in earnest.

Wisconsin Signs On

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and the WSAS examinations are new, reflecting developments after 1994, but prior to that time the DPI had worked for years on projects related to curricular goals and assessment. The rationale for such work follows directly from the view that K-12 education is a public good. Providing that public good effectively through the operation of the state's public schools depends upon a common understanding of what those schools should be and do. The state seeks to develop this common understanding by establishing goals and assessment programs; its input in these matters of academic substance complements the financial support it provides for K-12 education through local-assistance payments. Equity in public education presumably requires both sorts of support.

The Development of Wisconsin's Academic Standards: Phase 1

In 1971 the Wisconsin legislature directed the State Superintendent and the DPI to develop an educational assessment program to measure objectively the adequacy and efficiency of educational programs offered by public schools in this state. A 29-member Advisory Task Force on Education Goals was established, with representatives from the legislature, the governor's office, organized labor, business, private colleges, schools of education, school administrators, students, and school boards. This group produced *Education Goals*, published by the DPI in 1972. By design, the goals were expressed as broad, flexible statements of general purpose, as indicated by the headings under which they appeared:

- Self realization
- Human relations
- Basic skills
- Mental and physical health
- Career education and occupation competence
- Cultural appreciation
- Lifelong learning
- Citizenship and political understanding
- Economic understanding
- Physical environment
- Creative, constructive and critical thinking

The report did not say how the goals were to be implemented or when they were to be met.

Another round of goal setting took place early in the 1990s, when the legislature again called for a task force to establish statewide goals. The Educational Goals Committee was appointed, constituted of 12 members including the Governor, the State Superintendent, the President of the UW System, the Director of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS), and others appointed jointly by the Governor and the State Superintendent. This committee developed goals within three main categories — Learner Goals, Institutional Support Goals, and Societal Support Goals — and reported a categorized list of 28 goals to the Legislature on September 1,1993. Once again the learner goals were cast deliberately in broad terms:

- Build a substantial knowledge base
- Develop thinking and communications processes
- Apply knowledge and processes
- Acquire the capacity and motivation for life-long learning
- Develop physical and emotional wellness
- Develop character
- Be prepared for productive work
- Respect cultural diversity and pluralism
- Develop aesthetic awareness.

These goals remain in force today.

In addition to issuing broad statements of goals, the DPI has provided curricular guidance for teachers through its development and publication of curriculum guides — *A Guide to Curriculum Planning in Science* (1986), for example, and a *Guide to Curriculum Planning in Social Studies* (1986). While the guides published in this series vary one from another in matters of format, they do present rationales for the respective subjects in the K-12 curriculum, definitions of key concepts and skills, recommendations regarding the organization of content and skills in the curriculum, advice about the allocation of time for instruction, and recommendations of additional resources for teachers. By distributing the guides, the DPI has sought to assist teachers and school district curriculum committees

in planning and assessment. While some teachers and districts have taken the guides seriously, others have not. Districts have not been required to adhere to the guides in matters of course content or sequencing, and the recommended content has not been aligned with any statewide assessment program.

In these early efforts to identify the substance of the public's interest in education, federal policy played no part. Statewide task forces appointed at the direction of the legislature held hearings, deliberated, and produced lists of educational goals that were, by design, vague and not suited for use in measuring learning. The "soft" goals produced in this manner reflected a widespread conviction that — the state's responsibility notwithstanding — the DPI served only as a titular leader for K-12 education in the state. Its recommendations would be used as local districts might see fit to use them. Real authority resided with local boards of education, local teachers, and local parents.

The Development of Wisconsin's Academic Standards: Phase 2

In November 1994, the DPI received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop Challenging Content Standards in seven areas including dance, English language arts, foreign language, music, social studies, theatre, and visual arts. Task forces were appointed to develop performance standards, content standards, and proficiency levels for each area. In 1995, the DPI again used grant money from the U.S. Department of Education to develop additional standards in science and mathematics. Leading educators in other subject areas (including family and consumer education, health, and physical education) also found resources so that they could also develop standards.

The initial drafts of standards produced in this round of activity were published on newsprint and widely distributed throughout the state. They were examined in three rounds of hearings, with each hearing focused on a revision from a previous draft. The hearings continued into 1996. By that time, the English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies had emerged as focal points.

In January 1996, by executive order, the Governor created a Governor's Advisory Taskforce on Education and Learning, authorizing it to address polices related to educational standards, assessment, and accountability. The task force was asked specifically to identify the means needed for achieving improved student learning.

Meanwhile, the standards evolving under DPI auspices had begun to stir up controversy as a result of criticisms leveled against them during the hearing process. In January 1997, the Governor became directly involved, creating, by executive order, the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards. The Council consisted of the Lieutenant Governor, serving as chair, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the chairs and ranking minority members of the Senate and Assembly Education Committees, and one public member appointed by the Governor. This group was charged with developing academic standards for all students in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, at grades 4, 8, and 10. Unkind critics said at the time that the education policy scene in Madison looked like a Keystone cops comedy, with the Governor's Office and the DPI engaged in an uncoordinated chase after state standards. Cooler heads eventually brought the groups together under a plan providing that the DPI Task Force would be reconstituted, with new members to be appointed from the Governor's Office.

The reconstituted Task Force drafted a new set of standards and held more hearings, which once again produced rounds of criticism and praise. A revised version of these went forward to the Governor, and he approved them by executive order in January of 1998. By August 1, 1998, Wisconsin school boards would be required by law either to adopt these state standards or to develop standards of their own. Most districts adopted the state standards — some doing so only, they said, because the legislated deadline did not provide enough time for them to develop their own. Some larger districts and some smaller ones (Milwaukee and Whitefish Bay, for example) did choose to develop their own standards.

This second phase of standards development relied on statewide task forces appointed at the direction of the Governor and the DPI. The standards that emerged from the Governor's Council were, by design, more precise than the earlier versions had been. Also (and for the first time), the new standards were designed as one element in a larger program that would include statewide testing. These outcomes were shaped in part by the rivalry that came into view when the DPI and the Governor's Office jockeyed for control of the process. Federal policy also played a role. The character of the new standards — relatively detailed and specific, as per recommendations from the National Education Summit meetings of 1989 and 1996 — reflected a strong, new emphasis on national goals and state government leadership in K-12 education. Local boards of education could opt out of the standards initiative (in part), if they wished to, but only at high cost.

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The Development of Wisconsin's Assessment Programs: Phase 1

From 1975 until 1987, Wisconsin operated the Wisconsin Pupil Assessment Program (here and throughout this section we follow a summary prepared by the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau; (see Collins, 1999, January). It measured student achievement in specific skill areas, using criterion- and norm-referenced tests. In 1979, criterion-referenced tests developed by the DPI were administered in mathematics, reading, and economics; in 1985, they were administered in geography, arithmetic and mathematics. The instrument used for norm-referenced testing was the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS); it was administered each year. The DPI tests and the CTBS were administered to randomly selected pupils in a group of school districts chosen according their geographic location, size, and grade enrollment.

Results from the Wisconsin Pupil Assessment Program were published, with summaries showing aggregate levels of student performance. Because only some districts were included in the testing populations, the results permitted no comprehensive look at comparisons among districts or between schools within districts. Nor could individual student performance be assessed. At times, Wisconsin Pupil Assessment Program reports did include recommended actions to improve learning, but such recommendations were necessarily quite general in nature.

From 1985 until 1991, the DPI provided a competency-based test (CBT) for use in measuring reading, language arts, and mathematics proficiency. Participation by school districts was voluntary, and participating districts could, with DPI approval, develop their own competency tests if they chose to do so. Participating districts were required to test all pupils each year in grades K to 5, once in grades 6 to 8, and once in grades 9 to 11. They were also required to release test results to students' parents and to provide remedial services to students whose test scores did not meet district minimum standards. District scores were reported to the school board so that boards might consider curricular changes. Results were not publicized or reported to the DPI.

This early assessment activity in Wisconsin focused on student achievement in basic skills and selected subjects. It provided information similar in some respects to information provided today by reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The results could alert districts and the public only to problems of a general sort, and they provided no basis for detailed analyses of strengths or weaknesses in particular programs, courses or units of instruction. Nor were the results associated with any system of incentives for students or educators. It was not, in other words, a time of assessment for heightened levels of accountability. Phase 1 testing in Wisconsin might be likened to a brief, annual physical exam that yields, in the end, a word or two of advice from a kindly family physician who suggests that, while you could afford to lose five pounds and exercise a little more, you seem more or less to be OK.

The Development of Wisconsin's Assessment Programs: Phase 2

In 1991, the legislature repealed previous requirements for CBT testing and curriculum-based testing in reading, language arts, and mathematics. These were replaced by a requirement that all school districts administer Wisconsin "knowledge and concepts" examinations (WKCE) in grades 8 and 10, beginning in 1993-94, and that they administer a fourth-grade knowledge and concepts examination, beginning in 1996-97. The new examinations would measure students' knowledge in mathematics, science, social students, and reading and language arts, using test items that require "selected responses" (multiple choice) and "constructed responses" (short answers or essays written in response to assigned reading passages and prompts). These examinations are the heart of the program now known as the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS).

WSAS legislation does not make it easy for school districts to exclude students from required testing. Districts ordinarily must include students with disabilities, with appropriate modifications where necessary. For students who cannot participate at all, districts may devise alternative forms of assessment, provided that they supply a written explanation of the need in each case. School districts may exclude limited English-speaking students from WSAS testing, however, or they may modify the test format and administration for them. Parents, by contrast, have been provided a broad "opt out" clause; any student in grades 4, 8, or 10 may be excused from taking the test upon a parent's request.

For each student in each area tested, scores fall into in one of four proficiency categories: Minimal, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. Proficiency summaries (in percentage of students per category) are reported for all students who have been enrolled for a full academic year, regardless of disability. Scores are also reported as percentile rank-

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ings, comparing each student's performance to the performance of his or her peers, statewide and nationwide. All results are available for inspection at a DPI website.

In creating the WSAS, the legislature acted in 1997 to confer "high stakes" status on Wisconsin's curricular examinations, specifying that a student in grade 4 or 8 could not be promoted to the next grade level unless he or she scored at the level of basic or higher on the examination in question. Legislators soon had second thoughts, however; in 1999, in response to what some newspapers described as fierce parental opposition, the legislature modified its commitment to high-stakes testing in a new law that requires school boards, beginning in 2002-2003, to adopt written policies specifying district criteria for pupil promotions from grade 4 to 5 and grade 8 to 9. These criteria must address students' scores on the grade 4 and grade 8 examinations, unless the student is excused from the test; but no particular score is required by the state for promotion. In addition to addressing test scores, district criteria also may address student academic performance, as it is otherwise assessed, the recommendations of teachers (concerning academic performance only), and other academic criteria specified by the school board.

The High School Graduation Test

The legislature also acted in 1997 to require a high school graduation test, to be constructed from "eligible" content (i.e., content lending itself to paper-and-pencil testing) from the Model Academic Standards. The 1997 legislation stated that, beginning in 2002-2003, no school district could grant a high school diploma to any student who failed to pass such a test. But here, too, lawmakers soon had second thoughts. In 1999 they modified the law on the high school test, again requiring school boards to adopt, beginning September 1, 2002-2003, written criteria for granting a high school diploma (over and above prior requirements). The new legislation specified that district criteria must address student scores on the high school graduation test, but the criteria also could address academic performance, as it is otherwise assessed, plus teacher recommendations. Scores on the high school graduation test would, in any case, be recorded on students' transcripts.

Summary

Like the Phase 2 activities related to standards, the Phase 2 activities related to assessment reflect heightened, state-level concern about standards and assessment. The relative complacency of the 1970s and 1980s had given way to state-level demands for clear standards and accountability, particularly in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. All students would be tested (save for those exempted by parental request), and tests would be designed and administered in a manner that would permit comparisons to be made. Testing of this sort would provide the state with information it could use in gauging the relationship between public investment in education and measured results. Such testing also would support and shape instructional programs, and it would create new incentives for students to take school seriously, since their forward movement in school and ultimately their graduation would depend to some degree upon measured achievement. The friendly, informal checkup by the family physician seemed likely to be supplanted by more probative examinations, conducted by specialists — provided that such service was in fact what people in Wisconsin wanted.

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards

For each of four subject matter areas (English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies), Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards provide what are called content standards and performance standards for use with pupils at three grade levels (grades 4, 8, and 10). The content standards take the form of broad statements about what a student should know or be able to do within a sub-category of each main subject matter area. In English/language arts, for example, Content Standard B, for Writing, states that "Students will write clearly and effectively to share information and knowledge, to influence and persuade, to create and entertain." In science, Content Standard C, for Scientific Inquiry, states that "Students will investigate questions using scientific methods and tools, revise their personal understanding to accommodate knowledge, and communicate those understandings to others."

For each such standard there is a brief rationale, and each rationale is followed by three sets of performance standards, one for each of the three grade levels. The performance standards tell what students at the respective grade

levels should know or be able to do in respect to the content standards. For example, the grade 8 performance standards for English/language arts Standard B, Writing, read in part as follows:

"By the end of grade 8, students will:

B.8.1 Create or produce writing to communicate with audiences for a variety of purposes.

- Write a coherent and complete expository piece, with sufficient detail to fulfill its purpose, sufficient evidence to support its assertions, language appropriate for its intended audience, and organization achieved through clear coordination and subordination of ideas.
- Write a persuasive piece . . . that includes a clear position, a discernible tone, and a coherent argument with reliable evidence.
- Write a narrative . . .[etc.]."

And the grade 4 performance standards for science Content Standard C, Science Inquiry, read in part as follows:

"By the end of grade 4, students will:

- Select multiple sources of information to help answer questions selected for classroom investigations.
- Use simple science equipment safely and effectively, including rulers, balances, graduated cylinders, hand lenses, thermometers, and computers, to collect data relevant to questions and investigations."

Neither the content standards nor the performance standards specify levels of skill or knowledge to be attained by students, although the sequences of performance standards across grade levels do sometimes imply increased levels of depth, for a given standard, at higher grade levels.

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards have been evaluated by various authorities. An evaluation conducted in 1999 by the American Federation of Teachers determined that Wisconsin's standards were "clear and specific" at the three grade levels in English and mathematics, but not in science or social studies. Overall, the AFT gave the Wisconsin standards a letter-grade of C (Jerald, 2000, January 13, pp. 72, 86). More recently, an evaluation conducted by the Fordham Foundation (updating an earlier evaluation in 1998) generally praised Wisconsin's standards in English, found the standards in mathematics and science to be mediocre, and found the standards in history and geography to be poor (earning letter-grades of F). Overall, the Fordham Foundation gave the Wisconsin standards a grade of C-, up slightly from the D+ grade it bestowed in 1998.

Representatives from the UW System also have examined the standards in connection with a project undertaken to address issues of continuity between what is expected of students in Wisconsin's high schools and what students must know to succeed in higher education. In English and social studies, according to this analysis, a high school program informed by the standards would prepare a student to meet WTCS and UW System admission requirements without remediation. In mathematics and science, according to the same analysis, a high school program informed by the standards would prepare a student to enter WTCS institutions without remediation, but for admission to UW System institutions additional preparation would be required (UW System, 1999, October, pp. 3-7).

Wisconsin's Standards-Based Examinations

Wisconsin's standards-based examinations, used in the WSAS, are called the Terra Nova tests, published by CTB/McGraw-Hill. Sample questions from the Terra Nova tests may be viewed at a DPI website. Actual tests (from prior years) may be examined at local school district offices, under conditions intended to ensure test security.

The Terra Nova tests are written for each of the three grade levels (4, 8, and 10), with portions of each grade-level test given over to each of the four subject matter areas. Each student receives a test booklet with a bubble-sheet for marking answers and blank sheets for use in tasks that require writing. The booklets as a whole and particular pages in them have a user-friendly look, with plenty of white space, text in large type, some use of background washes for purposes of highlighting, and other graphic devices.

Test items fall into two main categories. Some are "selected response" items, calling for students to select a correct answer from a set of possibilities provided. These items, which constitute about 75 percent of each subject area test, are basically multiple choice items, and they are machine-scored. They are not all alike, however, and not all of them focus on low-level cognitive acts. A selected response question in language arts/ reading, for example,

might ask students to read a multiple-paragraph story and to select a response providing the correct answer to this question: "The story is mostly about_____." Selecting the correct answer requires understanding the story as a whole and making a judgment about its central focus. Teaching to such a test item would involve, obviously, providing practice in reading stories and deciding what each is "mostly about."

Other test items (about 25 percent of the total) are "constructed response" items. These items present students with a problem to be solved or a prompt calling for a written response. Some constructed response items call for straightforward computation or the recall of factual knowledge. Some call for more extensive responses, including paragraphs or essays to be composed. The short-answer responses are hand-scored by a professional reader; the scores awarded range from 0 to 1 point, in some cases, and from 0 to 4 points in other cases. As the 0-4 point spread shows, not all short-answer items call for a single, correct answer. The essays are rated by two professional readers, each of whom assigns a rating on a scale from 1 to 6 points. The two ratings are then averaged to produce a single score. A third reading is used to reconcile differences in cases in which the first two readers differ by more than one point.

The point scale used in rating essay responses reflects the intellectual tasks built into the prompts. In many cases they are tasks calling for comprehension, analysis, and synthesis, as well as the exercise of skill in spelling, punctuation, and syntax. A student taking a WSAS language arts/ reading test, for example, might read prose passages with a given thematic focus; then, in a "Let's Write" task, he or she might be asked to write a paragraph stating an opinion about an issue raised in the reading passage. The prompt might specify that in this paragraph writers must (1) explain their reasoning and support it, and (2) write in complete sentences, with correct spelling and punctuation.

...teachers who focus their instruction on the standards can have some confidence that in doing so they are preparing their students to perform well on the tests.

Other constructed response items require that ideas and information be expressed in specific ways appropriate to the subject area in question. Students taking the WSAS mathematics test, for example, might be shown a set of five blocks, in various shapes and colors; their task apropos the blocks might be to use them to represent a quantity or a ratio. Here as in the case of essay items, teaching to the test would involve far more than rote exercises in drill and recall.

The tests are aligned to the Model Academic Standards. This means that teachers who focus their instruction on the standards can have some confidence that in doing so they are preparing their students to perform well on the tests. But alignment here turns out to be a matter of degree. First, not everything implied by the standards gets tested by the Terra Nova tests. That is because skills and content implied by some standards cannot be tested in a paper and pencil test; oral language skills (English/language arts Content Standard C), for example, obviously require assessment of a different sort. Second, not all the "test-eligible" content (i.e., the standards-based content that can be tested in the Terra Nova tests) gets tested in each test. Alignment studies conducted by the DPI in 1998 showed, for example, that on one form of the grade 4 test only 54 percent of the test-eligible content in science was in fact tested, as compared with 80 percent in mathematics and 62 percent in social studies. Similar patterns of variability also appeared in analyses of the tests for grades 8 and 10 (Dold, Fortier, et al., 1998).

Students' scores on these examinations are converted to proficiency level scores: minimal, basic, proficient, or advanced. The "cut scores" defining these proficiency categories are established by a process known as "bookmarking, with social moderation." Teams of adults (teachers and other citizens) meet and take the tests themselves. Then they are presented with the full range of test items, arrayed in order of difficulty (as determined by the track record of student performance). With their own recent experience in mind, and given this array of items ranked for difficulty, the team members individually make decisions about where lines should be drawn to demarcate minimal achievement, basic achievement, and so on. The individual decisions are pooled, averages are computed, and people meet again in groups to discuss the outcomes of the process in an effort to reach a consensus. The proficiency levels established in this way are not determined by looking at percentile equivalents. The Terra Nova tests have been normed (any test can be) and they do yield percentile equivalents, but the percentile equivalents do not, according to DPI accounts of its procedures, drive the decisions about cut scores.

When students decline to take the examinations, as permitted by state law, they are recorded in district and state logs as "not tested." When district average scores are computed, however, the divisor used in the computation is the district's total enrollment. If large numbers of students do not take the test, therefore, district averages are dragged down. The decision to handle scoring in this way was a deliberate one, intended to deter districts from finding ways of discouraging certain students from taking the tests.

What Has the Standards-Based Initiative Cost?

Finding Out

One purpose of this study is to determine what Wisconsin has spent to date for standards-based reforms. In the account that follows we include costs for the development and implementation of the Model Standards as well as costs for the operation of Wisconsin's Student Assessment System (WSAS). In preparing the account we have relied on information from two main sources. First, regarding costs for developing and implementing the standards, we requested information from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau. This request was referred to the Department of Public Instruction Budget and Policy Office; people there prepared a report and supplied it to us. Second, we examined *Information Paper #32* on pupil assessment, prepared by the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau in January of 1999. We also requested that key portions of this study be updated for our report, and updated information was provided.

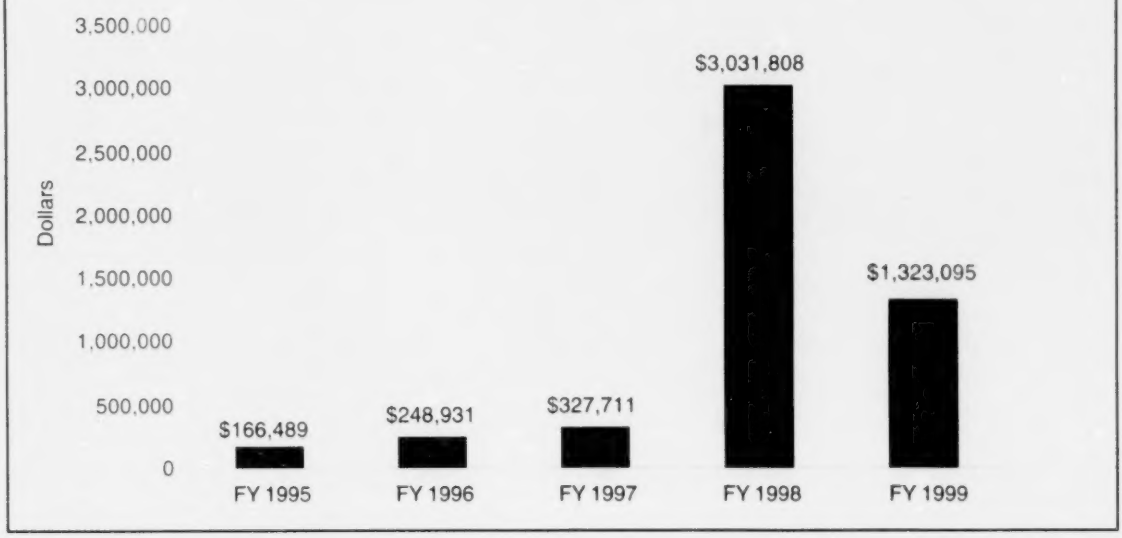
Even given this information, the cost question remains somewhat murky. First, it is not always clear how to separate categories of expenditure. The standards project and the WSAS have operated in isolation from each other at times, while at other times they have been closely linked. Second, the system of accounting used by the DPI has excluded some types of expenditure that seem relevant to the cost of the standards. For example, DPI spending figures for standards development and implementation do not include the cost of services provided by paid DPI permanent staff members who worked on the standards, nor does it include their travel costs. Other costs related to paid permanent staff members also are not included. For these reasons, we believe that our spending estimates are somewhat understated.

The Cost of Standards Development

From 1995 through 1999, Wisconsin spent $5,098,034 in developing and implementing the state standards (see Figure 1). Of the $5,098,034, $4,934,204 came from federal sources (see Table 1); the State spent only $115,179 of its own money on development and implementation the standards — about 2 percent of the total spending noted. Some of the federal money came by way of Goals 2000 programs. Goals 2000 grants provided $884,203 for early development and implementation of the standards. In 1998 and 1999, Goals 2000 provided an additional $5.4 million, and the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) provided $500,000, for implementation assistance to local school districts. (This $5.9 million is partially reflected in figures reported here, but to date some of it has not been spent.) The assistance was to be provided by Standards and Assessment Centers established in each of the Cooperative Education Service Agencies (CESAs) in 1998 and 1999. In the summer of 1998, for example, $200,000 was provided to each CESA agency to support teacher-training activities focused on the Model Standards and the WSAS.

Wisconsin's heavy reliance on federal funding to develop and implement the Model Standards obviously reflects incentives created by federal law. In 1994, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, renaming it the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). In 1994, Congress also passed the Goals 2000 Act. The IASA provides funding to states for the development of comprehensive statewide education plans (to be approved by the U.S. Department of Education) including challenging content standards and accountability through annual standards-based assessment of student learning. The IASA also provides that state plans are to be coordinated with efforts under Goals 2000. Title I of IASA sets forth requirements for assisting disadvantaged students to meet the state academic standards.

FIGURE 1 TOTAL FUNDING FOR STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT — $5,098,034



The Cost of the Assessments.

State data show that from 1995-1996 until 1998-1999, the DPI spent $13,023,875 on developing and administering Wisconsin's assessment system (see Figure 2). This total includes costs of printing, scoring, and reporting the Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test and the Knowledge and Concepts Examinations. It also includes spending to support development of the Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test, plus initial efforts regarding the high school graduation test and the grades 4 and 8 promotion tests. The money came almost entirely from Wisconsin general purpose revenues (see Figure 3); only about five percent of it came from federal sources.

Conclusions Regarding Costs

In developing the Model Standards, Wisconsin complied with IASA requirements in order to obtain IASA funding. It seems unlikely that the standards would have been developed without the federal dollars. For Wisconsin, therefore, the standards initiative is new in at least two respects. It represents the first instance of the Wisconsin legislature extending its reach into the specification of curricular content for the state's K-12 classrooms. It also highlights the state and its school districts acting as de facto administrators of a federal program, by means of which the federal government now reaches more directly and comprehensively into the operation of Wisconsin's K-12 schools than has been the case in any earlier federal education programs.

By contrast, the WSAS has been primarily a state-funded program. The state's willingness to spend its own money in support of WSAS might be taken as evidence of an independent, state-level interest in an improved accountability system — one that would have come into play with or without the incentives provided by the federal government. On the other hand, the WSAS is distinctly part of a standards-based accountability system, so that it could not stand alone in its current form. State support of it, therefore, also reflects the state's buy-in to the overarching federal program.

THE VIEW FROM LOCAL DISTRICTS: INTERVIEWS WITH CURRICULUM DIRECTORS

In order to learn how the standards and assessment initiative has affected Wisconsin school districts to date, we conducted telephone interviews with 50 school district curriculum directors. Interviews averaged 20 minutes in

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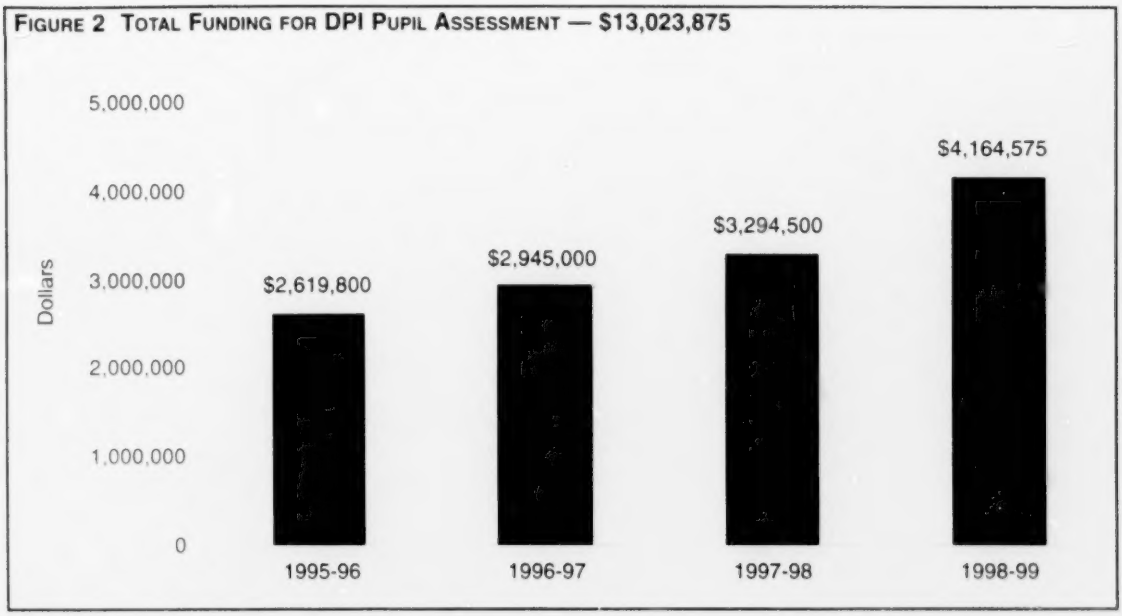
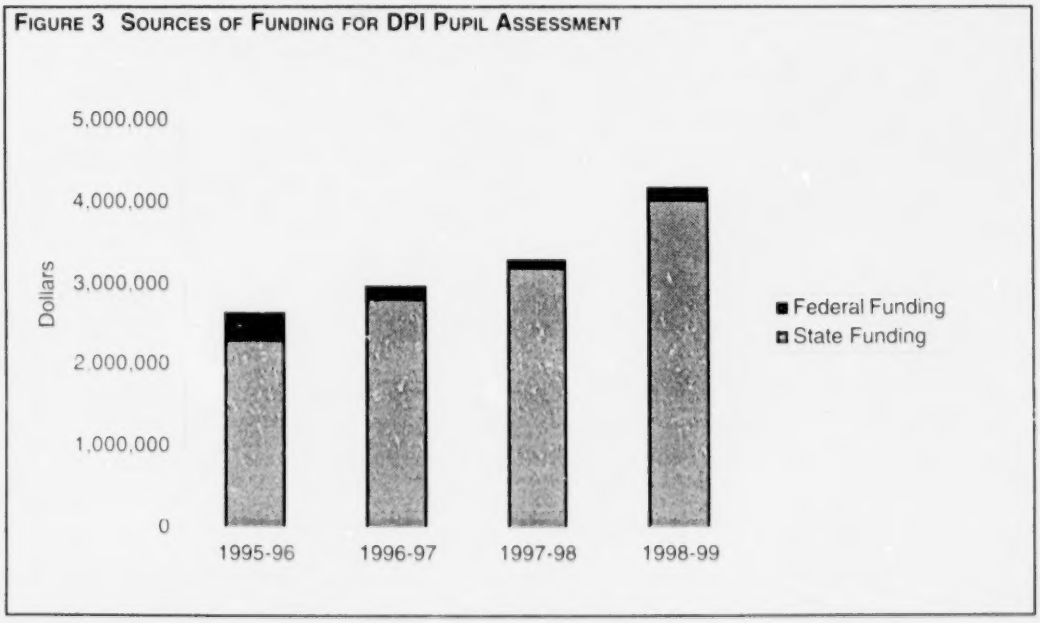
TABLE 1 SOURCES OF FUNDING FOR STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT

	FY 1995	FY 1996	FY 1997	FY1998	FY1999	Total
Federal Funding	$166,489 (100%)	$231,802 (93%)	$285,745 (87%)	$2,956,278 (98%)	$1,293,890 (98%)	$4,934,204 (97%)
Program Revenue			$12,169 (4%)	$17,906 (1%)	$18,576 (1%)	$48,651 (1%)
State Funding		$17,129 (7%)	$29,797 (9%)	$57,624 (2%)	$10,629 (1%)	$115,179 (2%)
Total	***$166,489***	***$248,931***	***$327,711***	***$3,031,808***	***$1,323,095***	***$5,098,034***



length. We selected the 50 districts at random from the total number of 426 possibilities. We chose to interview curriculum directors over teachers, principals, or district administrators in order to gain a district-wide perspective on how the initiative affects curriculum, teaching, and related matters across school programs.

Our telephone contacts yielded a high response rate; nearly everyone with whom we spoke was willing to participate. As would be expected with a random sampling from all of Wisconsin's school districts, most of the participating districts represented small towns or rural areas of the state (*e.g.*, Goodman Armstrong, Loyal, South Shore). Several districts representing somewhat larger population areas are also included, however (*e.g.*, Lake Geneva-Genoa City, Stevens Point, West Bend), as are several Milwaukee-area suburban districts (*e.g.*, Franklin, Mapledale-Indian Hills, Shorewood). The appendix lists the participating districts.



We summarize the curriculum directors' remarks below. We wish to note at the outset, however, that the remarks we summarize touch on a wide range of factual questions and issues of interpretation. Some of these issues, especially those related to test design and test scoring, are technical in nature and highly contested within the education profession. Particular statements we quote or paraphrase represent these issues as they look, to date, from the curriculum directors' points of view. The views stated and implied are of interest, we believe, even in cases in which they may reflect incomplete information or contested assumptions.

Questions Regarding Quality

Two of our questions asked participants to do a quality ranking (of Wisconsin's Model Standards and of the standards-based examinations) on a four-point scale from *poor* to *excellent*.

The Standards

Most curriculum directors ranked the quality of the standards as good or very good (44 out of 50). Only one said the standards are excellent, while five said they are poor.

Those speaking favorably about the standards emphasized that they provided a good start for new efforts aimed at the improvement of curriculum and teaching. "They are a whole lot better than what we had when the standards were whatever a teacher said they were," one said. "This gets teachers talking about their real work," another said; "we needed this direction." About the intellectual thrust of the standards, the curriculum directors were quite positive. Several commented on the extent to which the standards implied tasks requiring thinking as opposed to rote memory. "They do seem ambitious, challenging," one said in this regard. "They get at things we'd want our teachers to teach anyway," another said.

Those faulting the standards emphasized problems of vagueness. A common complaint of at least some standards was that "they raise too many problems of interpretation." "Teachers look at them," one curriculum director said, "and ask 'What does this mean? What am I supposed to do, according to this?' " Another said, "You can't show these to parents and say 'Here, this is what we're trying to teach.' " On this point, some curriculum directors made distinctions among the subject matter areas; those who did so said that the social studies and science standards tended to be the most problematic. In a related criticism, some curriculum directors faulted the standards for inconsistency (across subject matter areas) in levels of generality. "You'd think they'd look more alike in that way," one said, observing that the English/language arts standards tended to be more explicit and more fully elaborated than the social studies standards.

Among those who observed vagueness and generality in the standards, not all found those qualities to be defects. Some said, approvingly, that the standards on balance left room for professional judgment as teachers set about working with them to develop more specific performance objectives. In districts where such activity had been carried out systematically, with teachers working together to "benchmark" the standards across all the grade levels, curriculum directors said that the process had been highly worthwhile.

The Standards-Based Examinations

The standards-based examinations fared less well in the curriculum directors' rankings. While a majority (33 of 50) ranked the examinations good or very good — some prefacing their remarks with an emphatic "they're better than the standards" — a significant minority (16 of 50) ranked them poor. Only one ranked them excellent.

Those who spoke favorably of the examinations emphasized one or both of two main points. First, some said, results from the examinations do supply valuable feedback — provided that teachers engage in appropriate item-analysis sessions — about what students are learning and what they are not learning. Feedback of this sort, they said, can inform decisions about curricular content that should be added to courses and units, content that should be scaled back or deleted, and content that should be relocated. Second, some curriculum directors echoed comments they had made about the standards, stating that the examinations generally showed an appropriate balance between items testing for knowledge and items testing for higher levels of cognitive response. "If you're a problem solver, you'll do well on these tests," one said. "The constructed response items put a whole new light on the assessment task," another said; "that's where our kids have been scoring low — not on the multiple choice items — and that's what we have to work on. It's just the opposite of what people think."

Among those who criticized the examinations, some (fewer than we anticipated: four or five of 50) declined to comment on specific qualitative issues and emphasized instead their general distaste for standardized testing and

the uses to which test-score data may be put in public discussions. These curriculum directors saw the tests as evidence of bully tactics by politicians. They objected to public monitoring in which test-score data are used for making comparisons among schools. They expressed concerns about the adequacy of "paper and pencil" testing per se. They believed that students knew more than would be revealed by (what they presumed to be) such simplistic forms of testing. These latter comments express an attitudinal issue, in part, but they also highlight an underlying empirical question about the extent to which the examinations do or do not test for objectives of thinking and problem solving. The question is one for which clear answers could be provided through a comprehensive content analysis of test items.

Other curriculum directors spoke pointedly about technical problems related to the examinations. Of these, the one most frequently mentioned had to do with alignment. "The tests were developed prior to the standards," one curriculum director noted, "and I'm not convinced that they sample the standards well." Or again, "Our teachers spend a lot of time teaching to the standards, but the tests represent only about 60 percent of the standards."

...teachers often develop a "map" showing what content is actually taught in units and courses at each grade level.

A second technical criticism had to do with whether the examinations are suitable in their design and content for the criterion-referenced uses implied in high-stakes proficiency testing. "These are basically norm-referenced tests being used as if they were criterion-referenced," one curriculum director said. In the development of a norm-referenced test, he continued, the items most kids get right have to get dropped from the test, so that the test scores get spread out over a normal distribution. "But it shouldn't be that way in a test intended to learn which kids are proficient."

A third, related criticism had to do with scoring procedures, particularly the procedure for converting test scores to "cut scores" — i.e., proficiency levels. Here some curriculum directors simply objected to certain cut scores that had been set, they believed, at unreasonably high levels, especially in the case of the mathematics examinations. Others argued more specifically (extending the line of criticism about norm-referenced tests posturing as criterion-referenced) that the cut scores merely reflected percentile equivalents, for which no criterion-referenced rationale could be given. Moreover, this argument continued, the cut scores in a given subject matter area might vary markedly from the fourth- to the eighth- to the tenth-grade test, so that a percentile equivalent of 46 might earn proficiency for a pupil at one grade level while a percentile equivalent of 79 might be required for proficiency in the same subject matter area at a different grade level. "This has yet to be worked out," one curriculum director said; "so far we are just dancing with shadows."

A fourth line of criticism featured complaints about the test selection and test development. Here curriculum directors disapproved of a recent history of changes in vendors, changes in tests, and tardy development of alternative forms of given tests. They called for stability in these matters, demanding that tests be administered consistently — in valid, alternate forms — over a period of several years, as a precondition for high-stakes uses of test scores.

Implementation Activity

All the curriculum directors with whom we spoke (50 out of 50) said that their districts were involved in implementation activities related to the state standards and the WSAS. Some said their work on standards had begun as a local initiative, prior to the state's adoption of standards, and that they were now far along with the task of organizing their instructional programs by reference to the state standards and to local objectives and assessments related to them. Others acknowledged that they had a long way to go.

Most of the implementation activity described by the curriculum directors begins with review sessions in which teachers study the standards and then analyze the local curriculum in relationship to the standards. The review might also include study of the WSAS examinations; in some districts, all teachers took the examinations and discussed the test format and design with colleagues. Following the review, teachers often develop a "map" showing what content is actually taught in units and courses at each grade level. This map may be configured as a grid or database (several districts are using computerized systems for curricular monitoring and instructional design) also fea-

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turing the state standards. The cells in the grid then reveal which standards are addressed in which courses and units. In addition, test scores are often analyzed, also in relation to the standards/curriculum grid.

Reviews of this sort are said by curriculum directors to produce valuable discussions among teachers. For some districts, however, the exercise goes well beyond discussion. Teachers in some districts also work in teams to translate the state standards into more particular, more fully elaborated "benchmarks" (indicators of what pupils should know and know how to do in relation to a standard) for all the grades, K-12; and for these benchmarks they may also develop exemplary instructional units, with "key activities" (a certain sort of writing assignment, for example) to be featured in them. The benchmarks in some districts also give rise to local testing programs linked to the state standards, so that the WSAS examinations at grades 4, 8, and 10 will eventually be known to students as merely an extension of the local district's assessment system. In at least one district in our sample, report cards sent home to parents will soon reflect local standards-based assessment.

Work of this sort takes time, obviously. Some curriculum directors reported that their districts released teachers from their regular teaching obligations (replacing them with substitute teachers) periodically so that they could work in teams on aligning the local curriculum to the state standards. Some reported releasing students from classes early in the school day so that teachers could work on alignment in the afternoons. One district reported allocating 9 in-service sessions for standards-related work; one reported allocating 5-7 in-service days for standards-related work in each core subject area. Many districts offered teachers paid summer employment during which their task would be to work on standards-related curriculum development.

Implementation Problems: The Standards

In commenting on problems related to implementing the state standards, a handful of curriculum directors in our sample said that they and the teachers in their districts had encountered no new problems ("just the problems that usually crop up in curriculum work," one said), and some implied that they had dealt with the underlying problems long ago, for local reasons, before the state standards had come into play. But most curriculum directors described problems related to time and teacher resistance.

The problems most frequently reported by curriculum directors (24 of 50) had to do with time. "It's tough to get people freed up to do this work," was a typical remark, "especially given the difficulty of finding subs [substitute teachers]." Curriculum directors did typically recognize the time problem as an allocation problem: taking time for standards-related work meant not using that time for other priorities. Moreover, teachers often complained about being taken away from classroom duties to focus on standards-related work.

Many curriculum directors (16 of 50) also emphasized problems related to teacher resistance. "Teacher resistance is our biggest headache," one said. "The teachers are skeptical," another said; "it's hard getting them on board. They do not like doing this at all." By way of explaining teacher resistance, some curriculum directors emphasized that veteran teachers had seen many reforms — all described by their proponents as urgently needed — come and go quickly, so that skepticism now was understandable. Others said that teacher resistance had much to do with the vagueness of the standards; because some standards are expressed as broad concepts rather than precise performance objectives, and because they have been written for three grade levels only, they seemed to some teachers to provide little substantive guidance. In relation to this point, one curriculum director emphasized how new and unfamiliar standards-related work is for most teachers. "We have not known how to do this [curricular alignment and the development of local, standards-based performance objectives]," she said; "this calls for a 100 percent turnaround." Her district in fact is now sponsoring a required course focused on standards-related work for new teachers, since new teachers cannot be presumed to have learned about standards-based curriculum development or assessment in their university training programs.

Implementation Problems: The WSAS Examinations

Our question about implementation problems related to the examinations did not evoke a great outpouring of complaints from the curriculum directors. A handful, again, stated that the examinations themselves created no new problems. "We have always tested," one said. But the history of frequent testing in Wisconsin's classrooms also helps to explain the concern some curriculum directors expressed about instructional time lost to testing. Those who

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saw the new examinations as an added layer of testing emphasized this concern, and they feared that the problem would get worse as state law on "multiple chances" takes effect, requiring schools to offer the examinations more than once during the school year.

Not everybody saw the new examinations as an added layer, however. Some said that, with the advent of WSAS testing, their districts had cut back on other testing — dropping the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the California Test of Basic Skills, for example — so that net time allocated for testing had actually decreased.

Apart from the concern about time, curriculum directors mentioned anticipated implementation problems more frequently than problems facing them at present. The anticipated problems include parental and student resistance. "In future we'll face parental opposition as we move toward using the tests in [grade-level] promotion decisions," one said. Others spoke of students not taking the tests seriously or not taking them at all, and they feared that this problem would get worse as parents and students become increasingly aware of the "opt-out" provision in state law. "We've got the worst possible scenario here," one curriculum director said. "A political compromise allows parents and kids to opt out. Think about it. A parent will say, 'If my kid is doing well, the test can't help him — he'll be fine without it; but if my kid is not doing well, the test can't help him either. So what reason would there be for taking the test?' " In this vein, one curriculum director reported that in his district 17 percent of the testing population had opted out in a recent round of WSAS examinations. He was angry because these students are recorded (he said) as having scored zero on the examinations they didn't take, and the zero scores are averaged into school and district scores, dragging them down. "If they want it [standards-based reform] to stick," another said, "there has to be a consequence."

Impact on Curriculum

The state standards have not been accompanied by a state curriculum. To develop curricular responses to the standards and the WSAS, school districts must work on their own or in collaboration with other districts. In this work, some also have drawn upon services provided by the CESA offices and by various consultants. The effect, curriculum directors say, has been considerable. A strong majority (43 of 50) report that the standards and the WSAS have brought about some change or a lot of change in their curricula. Only 7 of 50 said the effect had been little change or no change.

Even those who said their programs were in good shape to begin with tended to credit the standards for encouraging a new level of attention to questions about what should be taught. "We were changing anyway," one curriculum director said, "but now we're much more focused. And we use our curriculum now. That's new." "We have much more consistency in expectations among our elementary teachers," another said; "now they cite the standards in their weekly lesson plans." In addition, curriculum directors gave several examples of particular changes. These include comprehensive revisions of a K-12 mathematics curriculum, new graduation requirements in algebra, geometry, and science, inclusion of more mathematics content in family/consumer education courses, the addition of economics and world geography to a social studies curriculum, and more attention to the teaching of writing. About these changes the curriculum directors generally spoke favorably. "Eighty percent of our schools before [the standards] didn't even have a curriculum," one said, not citing her source; "teachers just taught what they felt like teaching. That is changing."

Impact on Student Learning

In response to our question about the impact of the standards on student learning, most (28 of 50) curriculum directors said it was too soon to say anything definite. Of these, several also mentioned that the early indications looked promising: test scores in certain areas up, for example, or teachers reporting that they believed the standards and the WSAS were making a difference.

Some curriculum directors referred to patterns of rising test scores that they took as evidence of positive effects. One spoke of a 4-year trend, with rising achievement levels assessed by local benchmarks aligned with the standards. "We used to see a big spread in these scores corresponding to SES [the socio-economic levels of the students]," she said; "but in science now the SES-related differences are beginning to disappear because of gains by students in the lower SES populations. The reading/language arts scores are beginning to converge, too."

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In comments associated with the main question, some curriculum directors (9 of 50) went on to assert that, even with more test-score data over time, it would not be possible to say anything about the effects of standards-based reform on student learning. These views expressed global lack of confidence in standardized testing. A few notably pessimistic curriculum directors said that academic achievement simply cannot be measured.

Some curriculum directors from rural areas stated a special concern about the potential effects of WSAS testing on small districts. In an environment of small classes and small testing populations, he said, scores earned by a few very bright students or a few very slow students could skew the district profiles, sending misleading information to parents and the larger public. One curriculum director noted that some small districts are struggling, for demographic reasons, to retain their enrollments. In this context, he said, and especially given the factor of open enrollment options for parents, negative publicity related to distorted WSAS scores could hurt small districts badly.

A Burdensome Reform?

In response to a global question about whether the districts have found the standards and the WSAS to be burdensome, curriculum directors for the most part stated (41 of 50) that the standards had imposed a burden or a light burden (in additional effort spent on planning and record keeping, for example, and in time spent attending meetings). Only 1 of 50 viewed the standards as a heavy burden. Curriculum directors viewed the WSAS assessments as somewhat more imposing; 23 of 50 viewed the assessments as a heavy burden or a burden, while 22 said the assessments amounted to a light burden.

In these comments, however, many curriculum directors emphasized their view that the burdens involved were well worth shouldering, given the potential benefits at stake. "Yes, but any change is a burden," one curriculum director said; "you have to look at the outcome, not the burden. We're going to find that this work we're doing now was very worthwhile." "Burdensome but positive," another said; "if you want to change, you have to do the work required to change."

Two curriculum directors, emphasizing their willingness to do the work needed for standards-based reform, spoke of the *cumulative* effect of new responsibilities assigned to school districts. "I would never argue against the standards," one said, "but you have to remember that it is just one more thing added on to all the others. We're looking at new responsibilities that will come with the new teacher certification rules, and an added round of WSAS testing in the fall, and remediation for the kids who screw it up, and a high school graduation test of some sort, and with all this you can feel swamped. It raises the question of how many different directions we can get pulled in. I wish the movers and shakers in Madison could see the need to work with some priorities. Nothing ever gets taken off the plate."

DPI Policy

Acting pursuant to legislation, the DPI has held (or shared) responsibility for developing the Model Standards and the WSAS examinations. School districts working to implement the standards and the examinations might be expected to turn to the DPI for clarification of the policies in question and for advice about action steps. With this in mind, we asked curriculum directors in our sample about the extent to which information and advice provided by the DPI had been clear and helpful to them in their efforts.

In their responses, the curriculum directors clustered near the middle of a 4-point scale, from very clear to unclear. Most (36 of 50) said that DPI policies and communications regarding the standards have been clear or somewhat clear; 11 said they have been unclear. Again, most (37 of 50) said that DPI policies and communications regarding the WSAS assessment have been clear or somewhat clear; 11 said the policies and communications had been unclear for the standards and for WSAS; 3 and 2, respectively, found them to be very clear.

In explaining their rankings on this question, some curriculum directors expressed frustration with policy shifts that made it difficult for them to convey reliable information to parents. In respect to this problem, however, curriculum directors placed more blame on the legislature than on the DPI. "The legislation comes with no rules," one said, "and then it changes. Under these circumstances, the DPI is doing the best it can." "They're just puppets of the legislature," another said; "they can't give you a straight story because they're reacting all the time themselves to something new."

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Other curriculum directors distinguished between DPI efforts related to measurement problems and DPI efforts related to curriculum. Those who did so generally praised the measurement work while faulting the curriculum work. "The measurement people are really good," one curriculum director said, "but the DPI just doesn't have the curriculum specialists it needs to help districts with curriculum work." Weakness on the curriculum side is especially problematic, some curriculum directors said, in light of the fact that there was there was no curriculum to accompany the standards. School districts faced a major task of curriculum development and instructional design without coordinated assistance, except for services provided through CESA offices. (Each CESA received funding from the DPI to assist with implementation.)

As we have noted earlier, some curriculum directors preferred working by means of their own initiative, without strong direction from the state. But others saw the DPI posture in this matter as evidence of deplorably weak leadership. "All the work we have done has been without [DPI or CESA] help," one curriculum director stated; "the DPI did not provide any information about what worked well in other locations. Four hundred and twenty-six school districts were left to find it themselves." Another said, "We asked the teachers to start from scratch." Curriculum directors from small, rural districts were especially likely to feel burdened by having to rely only on their local capacity.

We did not ask the curriculum directors whether they would favor a state curriculum aligned to the standards and recommended by the DPI. Based on what some curriculum directors said, ruefully, about the loss of local district autonomy they have experienced of late (*e.g.*, "We still have some authority. We still get to decide who plows the snow in the school parking lots."), we infer that a recommended state curriculum would meet with resistance. But some curriculum directors volunteered their view that local autonomy was a thing of the past anyway (*e.g.*, "the state pays a lion's share of the bills, and state law controls spending, teacher training and certification, collective bargaining, and now even the school calendar"), and the state therefore might just as well drop the façade and provide school districts with a model K-12 curriculum that they could adopt.

Will Standards-Based Reform Survive in Wisconsin?

More than half of the curriculum directors in our sample (28 of 50) believe that standards-based reform will survive in Wisconsin and continue to play a central role in K-12 education. "It's made its way pretty deep into the culture of the profession now," one said; "it's not going to go away any time soon." Those making such predictions tended to be proponents of standards-based reform. "I certainly hope I'm right about this," one said; "Ms. Jones needs to teach fractions whether she likes fractions or not." They hedged their predictions in various qualifications, however — many asserting, for example, that the standards and the tests would continue to need revisions, or that no rigorous, high-stakes uses of the WSAS would survive.

Those who supposed that standards-based reform would fade into insignificance spoke of its vulnerability to political shifts in the legislature and the governor's office, emphasizing particularly the opposition that might snowball if school districts do choose to create stringent grade-level promotion and high school graduation criteria based on WSAS scores.

The latter point highlights a dilemma implicit in much that the curriculum directors said throughout their discussions with us. The legislature has basically handed the high-stakes testing problem over to the local districts. If district-level decisions turn the WSAS into a low-stakes accountability system, the incentive effects that the system was intended to create may be lost, as students and teachers discount the importance of the standards and the examinations. But if districts specify high levels of achievement as necessary for grade-level promotion and graduation, they may engender opposition sufficient to force repeal of crucial legislation in Madison.

If events do conspire to undo standards-based reform in Wisconsin, educators who have worked hard to implement it will feel embittered. "We have bet the farm on this," one curriculum director told us; "if the legislature does drop it, they better not come around again with any more bright ideas for about 100 years. They'll get laughed out of town."

Summary of the Interviews

- Most curriculum directors are satisfied with the overall quality of the state academic standards, rating them as good or very good. Commendations included comments about the extent to which the standards are chal-

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lenging and do underscore the importance of thinking and problem solving. Complaints often focused on problems of vagueness.

- While curriculum directors were generally more critical of the assessment system, most rated it as good or very good. Objections, over and above global objections to all standardized testing, focused on alignment issues and the cut-scores.
- School districts in our sample have been heavily involved in implementing the standards. While some districts are much farther along than others, most report having followed similar steps, focusing on curricular alignment and the development of local performance standards. Difficulties typically had to do with practical problems such as setting aside time for teachers to do standards-related work. Some curriculum directors emphasized the reluctance of teachers to change and the difficulty of translating curriculum standards into actual curriculum materials teachers could use.
- Most curriculum leaders report that the standards initiative has caused their school districts to make changes in their curriculum. These include changes within particular courses as well as larger changes across grade levels.
- Few curriculum directors report that achievement to date had improved as a result of the standards initiative; most said it is too early in the process to tell. Some curriculum directors doubt that the standards and assessment system will ever bring about improvements in student learning.
- Curriculum directors are divided on questions regarding DPI guidance and assistance. They split about evenly on questions about whether DPI policies and communications have or have not been clear and helpful. Many complained — some bitterly — about a lack of leadership from the DPI regarding curriculum development in relation to the standards.
- Curriculum directors are similarly divided on the future of Wisconsin's standards and assessment program. About half think it will survive and about half say it will not. Their responses in this regard highlight an important dilemma. If the program is not sustained with enough of an edge to alter the incentives associated with K-12 teaching and learning, it may fall into disregard; but attaching high-stakes significance to the program in order to strengthen it may also fuel political opposition that could eventually undo it altogether.

Conclusion

Standards-based reform in Wisconsin is off to a promising start. It has prompted many educators in Wisconsin to rethink their work in light of a new idea about what may be achieved in K-12 education through a deliberate effort to be clear about what should be taught and learned in school. It has prompted educators to work hard at strengthening their curricula and improving their instructional practice. Little can be said as yet about the main, desired effect, but the early indications, including effects on curriculum and teaching practice, look favorable. At the same time, it is hardly surprising that early implementation efforts have disclosed some problems and stirred up some resistance. The movement is in an early stage of development, and, as E.D. Hirsch recently observed, the effects of a half century of content-meager schooling will not be overcome quickly. It is, therefore, no time to get wobbly. The potential in view and the momentum built up to date argue strongly for efforts to sustain the initiative. Toward that end we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendations

1. The Governor should authorize the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards to coordinate and oversee ongoing efforts to develop and improve the standards and assessment initiative.

These efforts should include (a) commissioning a comprehensive review of the standards and the WSAS examinations, in order to determine whether revisions are warranted; (b) describing and disseminating model state curricula, synthesized from best practices reported by successful school districts, in order to strengthen the program of implementation assistance now provided for school districts by the DPI and the CESAs; and (c) developing and implementing a statewide system of "value added" assessment to be incorporated in the WSAS, so that schools and school districts may assess their effectiveness by reference to their own starting points.

(a) The Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards should commission a comprehensive review of the standards and the WSAS examinations, in order to determine whether revisions are warranted.

Some of the state's standards have been faulted (or described as limited) by independent evaluators, including evaluators representing the UW System. The faults or limits noted in these evaluations are also ones noted by many curriculum directors in our sample. Instead of responding to these criticisms — as DPI Superintendent Benson has — with intemperate, ad hominem attacks on the evaluators, the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards should press further to see what might be learned from a comprehensive review. The State of Indiana has recently done just that, commissioning Achieve Inc. to review its standards and recommend revisions. Achieve Inc. is also working on similar evaluations in Illinois, Oregon, and Pennsylvania (Manzo, 2000, February 9, p. 10). The example set by these states shows that developmental activity in response to constructive criticism can be taken in stride by some state officials as merely prudential.

Taking a new look at the standards now would perturb a process already set in motion. Educators and test-makers would have to adjust to any changes made, and some scheduled onset times for next steps in the process would have to be adjusted. But the state's long-term interest in establishing credible standards is clear, and ways could be found to hold students and teachers harmless in the time needed to make improvements.

The same point applies to steps that might be taken to strengthen the alignment of the WSAS examinations to the standards and to clarify the nature of the knowledge and skills addressed in the WSAS test items. Improved alignment and effective clarification of the examinations — through a well publicized content analysis, for example — might help considerably with efforts to overcome resistance on the part of teachers, parents and students. In a climate in which standardized testing per se gets demonized by some loud critics, even small shortcomings or limitations in a testing program can be magnified and distorted easily. Especially in the case of procedures involving technical specialization — *e.g.*, test design and scoring — the likelihood is high that misinformation or incomplete information will hold sway. Not all curriculum directors with whom we spoke were entirely clear about the criterion-referenced nature of the Terra Nova tests, for example, or about procedures used to establish the cut scores used in connection with them. Surely many teachers, including UW System faculty members now engaged in training teachers, know even less about these matters. Not everybody needs or wants to know such things, of course, but for those who should know there is no reason why the appropriate information cannot be disseminated effectively within the K-12 system and more generally — provided that the state does not shy away from the prior task of adequate self-examination.

The time is right for development of model state curricula, aligned to the standards in the four subject matter areas...

(b) Working in concert with the DPI and the CESA offices, the Governor's Council on Model Academic standards should coordinate and oversee an effort to describe and disseminate model state curricula, synthesized from best practices reported by successful school districts, in order to strengthen the program of implementation assistance now provided to districts by the DPI and the CESAs.

In implementing the state standards to date, school districts have worked with little curricular assistance from the DPI. According to the curriculum directors in our sample, moreover, assistance provided through the CESAs was spotty. Some districts were apparently served well by their CESA offices, while many others were not. This would have been no problem if the districts' implementation task had amounted to nothing but a routine matter of compliance. But of course that is not the case. Implementing the standards required many districts to engage, as one of our curriculum directors put it, in a complete turnaround. It required them to do things that they could not do without extensive new learning, and many of them had to undertake this new learning on their own.

The DPI has now begun work on revisions of its curriculum bulletins. The new versions, scheduled for release in summer 2000, will be aligned to the standards, and they will presumably be used in workshops and courses around the state. This may help to ameliorate the curricular-assistance problem about which many curriculum directors complained — provided, of course, that the new bulletins do in fact provide clear, substantial, detailed recommendations.

Given the magnitude and the nature of the school districts' remaining responsibilities under the standards, however, we believe that the state should do more than revise DPI bulletins. The time is right for development of

model state curricula, aligned to the standards in the four subject matter areas, plus an outreach program to provide practical, focused assistance to districts interested in adopting the models.

This action would no doubt prompt objections about the state intruding on local prerogatives. So long as the models in question derive clearly from a synthesis of best practices reported by successful Wisconsin school districts, however, dissemination of the models could quite legitimately be described as *state-provided access to information arising from local districts.*

Consideration is overdue, anyway, of the point that the state already controls — as another one of our curriculum directors put it — nearly everything about K-12 education except who gets to plow the snow in school parking lots. Perhaps this condition of state dominance ought to be reconsidered. But serious reconsideration would involve a host of state statutes and regulations including those governing school funding, spending, collective bargaining, teacher training and licensure, and now even the school calendar. Worrying about *curricular* autonomy in this context of encompassing, brass-bound state regulation really does call to mind an adage about locking barn doors after horses have been stolen. Until such time as we decide to put local districts back in control of other aspects of K-12 education, we ought to make the best of present circumstances by exploring the positive case for state leadership in matters of curricular substance.

(c) Working in concert with the DPI, the Governor's Council on Model Academic Standards should coordinate and oversee an effort to develop and implement a statewide system of "value-added" assessment, to be incorporated in the WSAS, so that schools and school districts may assess their effectiveness by reference to their own starting points.

Value-added assessment — currently in use in Tennessee, Arizona, Texas, and North Carolina — is an accountability tool for gauging how much students gain in academic achievement for a given year — i.e., how much "value" is added by each additional year of schooling (Stone, 1999, p. 239). It employs a method of data analysis that summarizes annual gains, as measured, for example, by the tests Wisconsin already uses at grades 4, 8, and 10. Applied to the aggregate scores of students taught in a given district, school, or classroom, value-added assessment becomes an indicator of district, school, or teacher effectiveness.

The measure of effectiveness provided in this way is fairer, many educators believe, than measures provided by traditional means of reporting scores (see, e.g., Bowman, 2000, February 9, p. 18). By comparing students' achievement to their own past performance, and by aggregating gains by school or school district, value-added assessment can appraise school and school district effectiveness regardless of differences among entering students, over which educators have no control (Stone, 1999, p. 240). In other words, it can capture the effect of schooling on students' progress regardless of students' starting points. It holds potential, therefore, for casting new light on schools and districts producing substantial gains among disadvantaged students, or schools and districts producing mediocre gains among advantaged students.

Some curriculum directors in our sample complained bitterly about the comparisons among school districts generated by Wisconsin's current method of reporting scores. They believed that these comparisons sometimes implied erroneous, negative evaluations in that they did not take account of their districts' forward movement in relation to their own starting points. They spoke of their need to engage in urgent and sometimes humiliating public relations campaigns to try to explain their case to a skeptical public. One of the benefits of value-added assessment is that it enables a state to sustain a highly informative accountability system without generating misleading negative impressions of the sort that caused resentment among these curriculum directors.

2. To provide a governance structure within which education policy initiatives have an improved chance of surviving on their merits, Wisconsin should (a) take constitutional steps to abolish the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and (b) establish a semi-autonomous Board of State Governors for K-12 Education.

It may be unduly optimistic to suppose that Wisconsin's initiative in standards-based reform (or any other reform involving fundamental change) can be sustained merely by means of technical adjustments and improvements, as important as those obviously are. As districts move to adopt grade-level promotion and high school graduation criteria in which test scores play some part, the entire standards-based effort could crumble. If districts give little weight to test scores in their high-stakes decisions, the tests and the standards they reflect may begin to look

insignificant and assume eventually the status of a relic in the system. But if districts give heavy weight to the tests, the failure rates may be high, and in that case parents and teachers (who generally oppose grade-level retention) might demand their repeal.

Could the public's long-term interest in education policy that generates stiff opposition in the short run be buffered in any way from direct political assaults?

It would not take a massive uprising to undo legislation crucial to standards-based reform. As legislative retrenching on Wisconsin's high school graduation test has shown, small interest groups can be effective in policy disputes when they seek concrete, immediate benefits, at costs that seem low, while those who oppose them must argue on behalf of remote benefits at costs that seem high. Picture it: 20 to 40 percent of the students in some districts fail to meet grade-level promotion criteria, but we could put a stop to this foolishness — the argument will run — merely by repealing some laws that confer no readily apparent benefit on most people anyway.

Could it be otherwise? Could the public's long-term interest in education policy that generates stiff opposition in the short run be buffered in any way from direct political assaults? Could we envision any institutional analogy to the U.S. Supreme Court, the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, which are buffered to a very considerable degree? In raising the question, we do not entertain the naïve (and impossible) notion that education ought to be taken "out of politics." Education policy ought to be governed, ultimately, by politics, in the same way defense policy ought to be. Any action taken to buffer a governance structure for education, moreover, would itself be a political action, and it could be undone by another political action if people subsequently opposed it with sufficient force. Acknowledging that as a point of logic, however, it remains true as a matter of empirical observation that some institutions are more vulnerable than others to direct political manipulation. What are the possibilities for a new K-12 governance structure in Wisconsin, aimed at retaining political oversight while at the same time buffering education policy against direct, interest group action leveraged through the legislature or the DPI?

There are at least two reasons for pursuing the question. First, elementary and secondary education looms large in Wisconsin's general purpose revenue expenditures. In 1999, state assistance to Wisconsin's 426 school districts was $3,860,000,000—nearly 4 billion dollars. This amounts to nearly 40 percent of total state spending. Total state aides to schools plus property tax credits enabled Wisconsin to reimburse an estimated 66.4% of school costs in FY 1999. Clearly the citizens of Wisconsin have a strong interest in making sure that public expenditures on this scale go to serve policies determined by something other than the efforts of those groups best positioned to lobby.

Second, while the policy initiatives that seem most likely to improve student learning are not very mysterious, the actions needed to move us in that direction will involve some short-term difficulties for parents, students, and even those teachers obliged by the policy to accept a new understanding of their responsibilities. By contrast, the gains — the public interest benefits — may be remote and difficult to visualize concretely. Consider an analogy. The Federal Reserve Board sometimes increases interest rates in its efforts to keep inflation low. While politicians know that most Americans benefit from low rates of inflation, the pain of increasing interest rates in the short term is hard for some to bear. Suppose that such policy decisions were to be made directly by the House of Representatives or the U.S. Department of Labor rather than the Federal Reserve Board. Interest groups — business, labor, and consumer groups — would make it difficult for elected officials to stay the course and keep inflation under control even in cases in which most economists and politicians would agree that that would be the best policy option.

Most politicians know, similarly, that it would be a good thing if our K-12 schools could succeed in improving student learning. But the travails that come with approving and implementing new policies needed for achieving that outcome will prompt interest groups to make it difficult for elected officials to hold fast to the policies in question.

Any new institutional arrangement intended to buffer education policy against these familiar pressures would have to meet three criteria. First, it would be critical to provide democratic legitimacy for the new institution. Accordingly, the new institution itself would be created though normal state constitutional and legislative procedures. Requirements for legislative oversight and regular reporting would be essential. Second, in order to buffer the new structure from direct interest group pressure, people appointed to it should be appointed for relatively long terms, as

is common in appointments to the judiciary. Third, the structure in question should provide for regional representation. Education in Wisconsin has until recently been marked by a tradition of local control. Erosion in that tradition — welcomed by many for positive effects brought about by the strengthened role of the state — has come at some cost in public confidence and respect. Regional representation would help to mitigate apprehension that might be associated with the establishment of a state Board.

How might all this be accomplished? First, we propose that the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction be constitutionally abolished. The unique structure of the Office has contributed to the Department's drift toward a "captured agency" status. The producers of public education in the state have been able to gain control of their state regulatory agency in regard to many matters bearing on the public interest. Little could be done under existing constitutional and statutory provisions to reorient the Office to a more independent role.

Second, we propose the establishment of a semi-autonomous Board of State Governors for K-12 Education. The Board would consist of nine members appointed by the Governor and approved by the state Senate to 10-year, staggered terms, with two members retiring every two years. Six of the nine seats would be "at-large" seats and three seats would be "regional." One regional seat would be designated to represent rural schools, the second to represent intermediate-size school districts, and the third to represent the Milwaukee Public Schools, the only district of its size in the state. The Governor in making the regional appointments would be required to seek the advice of local school board members, CESA heads, and district administrators.

Third, the Governor would appoint one Board member as President and another as Vice President of the Board, to serve 5- year terms. The President would serve as head of the current Department of Public Instruction. The DPI would continue to serve the functions it serves today, but within the new structure the DPI would be accountable for its actions to the Board of State Governors for K-12 Education. The President of the Board would be obligated to make an annual report to the Legislature regarding the state of education in Wisconsin.

We believe that a Board structured in this way could buffer a sphere of education policy, providing, for any given policy, adequate time for start-up and developmental activity, so that the initiative might stand or fall on its merits as viewed from a public perspective.

Note: We are indebted to the work of Alan S. Blinder (1997), former vice chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. His thinking on ways to make public agencies more responsive the pubic interest has influenced our thoughts in the final section of the report.

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Appendix

Curriculum directors from the following school districts participated in telephone interviews for this study:

Almond-Bancroft
Ashland
Berlin Area
Cadott Community
Chilton
Clear Lake
Columbus
DeForest Area
Denmark
Ellsworth Community
Erin
Flambeau
Franklin Public
Geneva J4
Genoa City J2
Goodman-Armstrong
Hartford UHS
Highland
Howard-Suamico
Ithaca
Kettle Moraine
Kewaskum
LaFarge
Lake Geneva-Genoa City
Loyal
Manawa
Maple Dale-Indian Hills
Mauston
Melrose-Mindoro
Milton
Minoqua J1
Montello
Neceda Area
Oconto
Prairie Du Chien Area
Rosendale-Brandon
Rosholt
Saint Croix Falls
Shorewood
South Shore
Spooner
Spring Valley
Stevens Point Area
Three Lakes
Union Grove Hi
Union Grove J1
Wauwatosa
Wauzeka-Steuben
West Bend
Westfield

About the Institute

The **Wisconsin Policy Research Institute** is a not-for-profit institute established to study public-policy issues affecting the state of Wisconsin.

Under the new federalism, government policy increasingly is made at the state and local levels. These public-policy decisions affect the life of every citizen in the state. Our goal is to provide nonpartisan research on key issues affecting Wisconsinites, so that their elected representatives can make informed decisions to improve the quality of life and future of the state.

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We believe that the views of the citizens of Wisconsin should guide the decisions of government officials. To help accomplish this, we also conduct regular public-opinion polls that are designed to inform public officials about how the citizenry views major statewide issues. These polls are disseminated through the media and are made available to the general public and the legislative and executive branches of state government. It is essential that elected officials remember that all of the programs they create and all of the money they spend comes from the citizens of Wisconsin and is made available through their taxes. Public policy should reflect the real needs and concerns of all of the citizens of the state and not those of spe-

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